The Choir Stalls of León Cathedral

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The choir stalls at the cathedral of León are the earliest of a group of Gothic stalls that follow an important iconographic program based on their dorsal panels on the relationship between selected figures from the Old and the New Testaments, as shown by figures carved on the dorsal panels of the upper and the lower stalls.²

The stalls were begun circa 1460.³ At that time the León chapter probably wanted a simple ensemble since a carpenter, Maestre Enrique took charge of the work. He was sent to various churches to look for a model. The stalls he visited were decorated only with ornamental and very simple motifs.

By 1464 Maestre Enrique was apparently replaced by a Flemish sculptor, Juan de Malinas, who probably started the work over again. It is possible, at this point in time, that the chapter wanted to introduce a new model of choir stalls, perhaps influenced by the types in use in central Europe, especially those in Germany and Switzerland. This new model needed a new type of artist, able to carve large figures. This was the task of Juan de Malinas who probably worked on the stalls until his death in 1475. During these eleven years, he worked mainly on the dorsal carvings and also on many of the profane motifs.

Maestre Copin replaced Juan de Malinas and completed the eighty-four stalls, which, by the 1480s were installed in the choir of the cathedral before the altar. In the eighteenth century the stalls were moved to the nave, where they remain today. The changed placement of the stalls resulted in the loss of eight high stalls and several panels.

³ M.D. Teijeira Pablos, La influencia del modelo gótico flamenco en León. La sillería de coro catedralicia, León, 1993.
The ensemble is three sided, in a U-shape, and on two levels. The dorsal panels of both levels are similar except that the lower level panels are smaller with half figures.

The difference in size and shape of the dorsal panels emphasized the difference between the Old and the New Testaments, and also the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Thus the dorsals of the upper stalls were carved with full figures of apostles and saints, and the low ones have only half figures of Old Testament prophets and heroes. The difference in importance between these two groups of figures was also emphasized by the persons who sat in the stalls: canons in the upper level and the subordinate staff in the lower level.

The figures carved in the dorsals were very carefully chosen. One or more panels represent each important group in religious history: apostles, evangelists and New Testament saints, martyrs, healing saints, bishops, popes and fathers of the church, monastic, local and female saints, prophets, patriarchs, Old Testament kings and heroes. They are placed in the order of their importance to the church hierarchy, the most significant near the bishop’s and king’s stalls (Figs. 1 and 2) and the lesser figures on the north and south sides.

The profane motifs are plentiful, carved on misericords, armrests, partitions and end panels. The subjects are similar to those on choir stalls throughout Europe: scenes of everyday life, religious satire, popular proverbs and literary themes. Many fantastic animals are carved in a spontaneous and free style.

Glutton Fool Eats

León
Figure 1
Leon Choir Stalls, High Level

The Profane Arts / Les arts profanes
FIGURE 2
LEON CHOIR STALLS. LOW LEVEL

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